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# Democracy and cultural psychology

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## Abstract

This paper discusses a theme touched upon in Robert Innis's article on cultural psychology and philosophy, namely how we, within cultural psychology, seem to be undecided about how best to provide value on a societal level. It is discussed how psychology has provided us with several valuable tools for examining and understanding our own existence, despite the fact that it is also a field that has seemed to be in one crisis after another since its inception. It is argued that cultural psychology is an intellectual technology that allows us to peek under the hood of society, which is of utmost importance in today's society, where democratic ideals are under severe pressure. Corporations, industries, and privileged individuals exercise increased control over political processes, having created obscure systems by which they operate. It is concluded that cultural psychology needs to find its role as a scientific discipline that contributes to making transparent the political, social, and interpersonal relations that define how our lives are shaped, if we want a discipline that provides value beyond the scientific realm.

## Keywords

Cultural psychology, democracy, philosophy, science studies, values

## How did we get to 'democracy'?

One of my main takeaways from reading Robert Innis's paper was that this would be a nice opportunity to contemplate the position that cultural psychology inhabits in the scientific realm. Not just the position it already has, but also what we want cultural psychology to be when peering into the near future. The title for this commentary is an altered version of John Dewey's book 'Democracy and Education' (2011). Dewey published this book as an introduction to education that would not overemphasize the role of either the individual or the society. Instead, he advocated for his perspective to see the mind as that which emerges in the communal process between the two (Dewey, 2011, p. 2). Evoking democracy

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is very powerful to me, not in the least because I find the ideals found in democratic thinking among the most beautiful conjured up by the mind of man. Whenever philosophy is brought up as a topic I always find myself straying to the questions at the core of the discipline: what is good and what is just? Surely, as is pointed out by Innis, philosophy concerns itself with matters that are often taken into abstraction in order to divine truths or simply to lessen the interference of real world consideration, so that matters may be discussed on a general, and purely academic level. Concepts like equality and freedom, both of which resonate strongly with democracy, are often linked to debates belonging to the philosophic tradition. In cultural psychology, however, we should be able to advance this kind of thinking from abstraction to the practical, since we find ourselves in the intersection between the two disciplines, exactly as stated by Innis in his very first line of the paper (2016, p. 331). In cultural psychology, we have, in addition to Dewey, Charles Peirce, Lev Vygotsky, and Serge Moscovici that we count among the ‘founders’ of the principles we follow. From them we have been informed of ways to regard the intimate relation between our discipline and its ontological basis – the human and its realm, which is also one of the key points made by Dewey in *Democracy and Education*. However, by considering this relation one question is of utmost importance, one not overseen by Innis, who asks:

Is cultural psychology on its own in a position to determine whether our conduct is out of control and hence ‘irrational?’ Here we encounter once again the problem of cultural psychology as a normative science. A human science such as cultural psychology, which engages self-interpreting human beings, clearly has to settle the issue of whether it intends to, or even would want to, “leave everything as it is,” or whether it can at least determine what simply cannot be left as it is on both the social and personal levels, which are clearly inextricably intertwined. (Innis, 2016, p. 340)

Innis here states that we, as researchers in the scientific discipline that is cultural psychology, remain undecided, maybe even unreflective, about our role in society. I believe that trying to answer this question is a necessary next step. We are at a point where Dewey’s lessons about the mutual constituent relationship between the person, and that which lies beyond the individual has been taken to heart. The fact that psychology is a normative science, as pointed out by Innis in his paper, but more extensively by Brinkmann (2011), makes it even more important that questions of the kind Innis asks, but does not fully answer in his paper, are treated more urgently. In cultural psychology we have many contributions that advance our understandings of the complex, and wide-ranging societies we live in, along with the norms and the history that we form, just as we are formed by them. However, psychology as a whole, has been feeling the stress of an increasing pressure that has been building for the better part of a decade. It is an external pressure of demands, which forces us to explain wherein our value as scientific contributors lie. To give an answer, we would need to define what values we provide on terms that are scientific, but I also believe that part of the answer can only be given by examining

how we contribute to the democratization of both society and science. Our legitimacy as a scientific discipline is decided not only internally in the scientific community, but also by the policy-makers, and not in the least: by the people.

The privilege we, as scientist, have is one wherein there is a set of duties built in. Our privilege rests upon three pillars that are to (1) advance our understanding of the world, technology, and human life, and (2) to generate economic surplus, a necessity in many of today's societies, and not in the least (3) to disseminate both new (and older) works of knowledge to the public for the sake of general education and enlightenment. Boiled down it is a simple yet complex task of increasing, sustaining, and disseminating. Economy is something we need to factor in, because it is the part that allows the clockwork to keep on ticking; it is our battery. A battery is an integral part of the machinery, but not in itself the point of it. It is the means, not the goal. However, in recent times it has become just that. Neoliberal values are overtaking the core of democracy, which we see with the increase of deregulation, privatization and all the effort put into maintaining a functioning market (Harvey, 2007, pp. 1–4). In this I recognize the urgency for not leaving Innis question, as quoted above, unanswered. In the next section, I shall examine how the value that the collected psychologies provide translate into duties we have as researchers in a normative field of science.

## **The value of cultural psychology**

Psychology as a field has found itself in a crisis since its inception. Time and again we are struck with criticism, and recent years have been no exception. Two big reports stand out thus far. First is the publication of the now infamous study that replicated one hundred psychological experiments and was only able to find significant correlations in less than a third of them (Open Science Collaboration, 2015). Second, there is the revelation that leading figures of the American Psychological Association had colluded with the CIA in torturous interrogations in regards to the war on terror, according to the independent review informally known as the Hoffman Report (Hoffman et al., 2015). These examples have only added to the questions people have; what is the value of psychology and what good does it do? As in some cases, it obviously does the opposite of good. I myself have had to argue with those from other disciplines about psychology's status as a science and even as a discipline that is taught in universities. Clearly, an open conversation with the scientific community and the public about psychology and its values is needed, but it is also something we need to continually address internally, since these types of question do have merit and deserve answers.

Putting other branches of psychology to the side and focusing on cultural psychology, we can begin to ponder whether what we do does provide value. Cultural psychology finds itself on the verge between philosophy and psychology (while we must not neglect that we are also deeply linked with sociology, technology studies, and anthropology), and our particular "brand" of research provides interesting insights into the human condition, which is also pointed out by Innis, and how we

all manage to live together (see Brinkmann, in this issue, for more about the normativity of psychology as a moral science). We are concerned with the human as a cultural being. What we exhibit is a curiosity towards how we experience the paradox that is both the simplicity and complexity of living. Some cultural studies make their contribution by adding to the historical perspectives, thereby helping to increase our total understanding and knowledge about the human societal and cultural development through the ages, while other areas focus on contemporary societies and conditions, which allows us to understand better what is going on in our time. Often times an emphasis in cultural psychology is on establishing links between the historical and the contemporary. Through these efforts we put into words, elements of human life and conduct that would not otherwise be expressed or known. I would not call it a stretch to assign the same value to this type of research as we do to astronomy. Yes, we probably do not have any hope for a Grand Theory that will unite all of psychology, and it is probably not through us we will achieve ascension into the post-physical realm, opposite astronomers who tease us with their tantalizing promise of locating new planets ready to be colonized as safe alternatives to our impending, self-inflicted doom on this world. Despite knowing this, I suspect most cultural psychologists rest easy with our role (although being an astro-psychologist would have a certain ring to it), and so should the rest of the scientific community. We approach our field both systematically and conduct our research in order to bring into light the processes by which society operates. Rather than show you a map of the night sky, we are the guides who take you to the stars themselves (Flyvbjerg, 2006, pp. 240f). What we happen to have against us is that we engage with a part of the scientific spectrum where we often need to revise what we presume to know for it to remain accurate, and even then it will only be accurate to a certain extent. People change. Societies change. Fast. In comparison, we expect atoms and quarks to remain somewhat stable over time. Seeing ourselves as the microscopes of the human- and social sciences would not be wrong. We are constantly zooming in on specific samples; therefore, we constantly need to appropriate our knowledge, methods, and theories to abide by specific conditions, since much of our presumed knowledge stems from highly localized contexts and often times prove to be completely wrong in other settings (Danziger, 1997). Luckily, however, we are a heterogeneous discipline, and therefore able to look into many different areas through different methodological lenses (Valsiner, 2009, pp. 5f). Attaining a clearer and better understanding of human living and culture should in itself be a worthy goal for a science to engage in. Our power of prediction might be small, but that is only because we seek to understand the close contexts of why something becomes what it is. There is no ultimate end in sight. Our ontological field is always evolving, which means we too will have to continually adapt our epistemological grasp.

Doing research is in itself a worthy pursuit. If this was not the case, no basic research would receive funding, and Einstein or Bohr would not have the reputation still clinging to their names today. This might seem like a tautological statement, which is because it is exactly that. We have an interest in attaining

knowledge, because we lack it in the first place. This creates an interest, along with intellectual resources being put into the endeavor of pursuing that interest. Research thus becomes valuable through an utterly pragmatic process of valuation as described by Dewey (1939, pp. 36–38). Not all scientific endeavors may seem to have an immediate purpose, and only time will tell if we ever find one for everything we pursue. Despite this, most discoveries often end up becoming *means* to other *ends* in problem solving (another point made by Dewey, 1939, p. 43), which is why most scientific efforts are part of our collective goal, which is to better understand the world we inhabit. Holding on to this fact is important when facing the current attacks on the humanities and social sciences, which only build upon the criticisms already applied to psychology and its related fields. A key argument for devaluing the humanities is that in an economic sense, a liberal arts major, a historian, or an English major is worth less than a physicist, or an engineer. A rationale that is deeply seethed in the history of science (Gould, 2011, pp. 11–20), which has now found its way into market logics where, comparably, we, in the humanities, are less likely to do research that can be patented (viz. research that can easily be transformed into money). Wealth can be a byproduct of doing science and engineering, but is not the be-all end-all of scientific endeavors. While the argument is true in one form, people educated in the humanities do have a harder time finding jobs (Carnevale & Cheah, 2013), but it is a poor measure of the value of learning to exclusively look at it in terms of future earning potentials. Money is what we need to sustain scientific practice; it is not the goal of scientists to ensure economic growth for the sake of it. Money-making has become an end so standardized by custom that we rarely pause to scrutinize whether any value is really produced by pursuing it (Dewey, 1939, p. 43). This again brings us to the heart of my point: ensuring that people are taught and practiced at critical thinking, communication, cultural understanding, and history is the backbone of preserving a democratic society. It is from philosophy, the humanities, arts, and the social sciences we have witnessed the rise of empowering movements such as the early Marxism and later feminism. Movements like these have played a vital role in the bettering of the lives of millions of people all over the world (Christians, 2011, pp. 73–75).

So, to clarify my point: the theoretical considerations that are borne from the intersectional crossing between cultural-psychology and philosophy do provide value. It is of worth in the sense that it adds to the cumulative scientific understandings. The Danish word for science, *videnskab*, which translates into: *knowledge creation*, is something we surely are guilty of doing as cultural psychologists, despite the fact that our results often are unstable and context dependent. We speak from a position that allows us to make transparent the processes by which societies operates – a strong tool that can act as a safeguard for democracy. Journalism is at times referred to as the fourth estate, or the fourth pillar of democracy (Schultz, 1998). In the crossing we have between psychology and philosophy shouldn't we, in some capacity, fulfill the same role? Our approach is often more systematic, supported by sources, and documentation (be they qualitative or quantitative), while also resting on the shoulders of those who came before us. Journalism deals with

the here and now, whereas we are able to stay with a subject more thoroughly. Linking science to values and political life is not a foreign theme to introduce. Unfortunately, we mostly see the dark side of this link. As Steinar Kvale has pointed out, psychology, and this is true for science in a general sense too, often allows the market to decide its uses and direction, be it as a natural science, a therapeutic form or a way to optimize an organization – money is a powerful motivator (Kvale, 2003, pp. 595–597). However, our starting point was that cultural psychology is, in fact, a normative science. Why should we be reluctant to engage openly with politics and the market, when it is already the case that these are influencing science-making? The realization that we have a normative dimension essentially means that we cannot claim to be neutral, we should face the consequences of what it means to be part of an institution that affect peoples lives in a very real sense and consider what kind of impact we want to have. We need to consider our democratic duties to the people in order to repel, to the best of our ability, the unhealthy processes that we are ruled by, and do this by shining a light on them. Nikolas Rose has pointed out that psychology is more than abstract theories, rather it is: “[...] an ‘intellectual technology’, a way of making visible and intelligible certain features of persons, their conducts, and their relations with one another” (Rose, 1996, pp. 10–11). Through the intellectual machinery, the world is reified and rendered thinkable, which in turn put it into terms that are concrete and therefore more likely to be subject to change.

### **Why is the notion of democracy important?**

Democracy is one of the crowning values that we in the western, industrialized world use to style ourselves with. As a value, it is instilled in us from the very start of our lives, and it has since been used to rationalize going to war, and as a reason to start and support revolutions against totalitarian regimes the harrowing consequences of which we now see manifest themselves as problems on an international scale. To fly the banner of democracy is very powerful – to the degree where it almost becomes axiomatic to assume democratic values above anything else. Just as I argue about economics and neoliberalism, so too does democratic values need to be scrutinized. In order to do this, we need to distinguish between democracy as it is practiced, and the ideals it is based on. Any form of oppression or discrimination goes against the democratic principles. What compels us towards democracy are the promises of freedom and equality (Aristotle, 1999, p. 127). The flaw in this argument is, of course, that at the time where democracy was first practiced, women, slaves, and lesser men were not given voice. Yet, I would find it odd to hold a lesser developed sense of the human rights against the idea of democracy to this day, as they are easily separated from each other, where we today have a much more inclusive category when it comes to whom we name citizen. The notion of citizenship must not be forgotten either. An implication of democratic rule is that with freedom comes responsibility, to both govern and let yourself be governed (Aristotle, 1999, p. 70f). Democracy is not the road towards a society where one



can do everything according to one's own fancy, but quite the contrary. Living in a democracy is one of obligations and duties towards others – just like the duties reflected in the practice of science. If we wish to progress towards a society that allows for freedom, we need to fulfill the obligations and duties of the democratic constitution, herein, says Aristotle, lies not slavery, but salvation (Aristotle, 1999, p. 127).

The democratic values that we hold in such high regard are under attack. Neoliberal values, the commodification and privatization as the means for economic regulation (Rose & Millar, 1992, p. 198), have in the past decades gained an increase of influence in our current system. In several areas we see matters of public interest overtaken by corporations and policy-makers. Some examples are big pharma's role in psychiatry (Rose, 2007), corporate interests in energy and climate (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2012), and the neoliberalization of the educational system (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Rømer, 2015). We have seen recent example of this in Denmark too, where we saw a new Freedom of Information Act passed in 2014. This act hinders access for the public and journalists to documents that are relevant for maintaining transparency in the political process (Cphpost.dk, 2013). It is an ironic turn of events, when those in power pass acts that decreases transparency, while at the same time arguing for more surveillance of public spaces and private citizens. These examples alone go against the principles of a democratic rule. Democracy is essentially anarchistic in that it relies on the seventh title that provides a mandate to rule or govern, as they are listed by Plato in his work, "the Laws" (Ranciere, 2013, pp. 77f). This is the title of divine (random) selection. Some of the other titles listed are the right of the strong to rule the weak, the parents to rule the child, the noble to rule the slaves, the elder to rule the younger. All of these titles have a form of governing named after them e.g. technocracy, oligarchy or aristocracy. Democratic rule distinguishes itself from these forms of governing, since for it to truly work, and for its principles to be upheld, we would have to rely on random selection rather than letting anyone govern, because of preconceived notions of the entitlement to rule. Abiding by the seventh title is the only fair way to ensure the absence of all the other titles when it comes to governing (Ranciere, 2013). Of course direct democracy would be the sure-fire way to ensure the rule of the people as opposed to the model of representation which has been adopted by many modern nations. The ineffectiveness of this form of government in ensuring equality and freedom among people are what is at heart of Jacques Ranciere's critique in his book *The Hatred of Democracy* (2013) about the state of the modern democracy. Here he shows that the idea of representational democracy goes directly against the principles of democracy, since a parliamentary system, or regime as he names it, effectively allows an elite to be established – those who, for various reasons, see themselves as more fit to govern. We end up with a ruling segment of the population only depending on the people during elections, where they obtain a legitimized mandate to govern; they will then proceed to operate without much interference from those who gave them that mandate (Ranciere, 2013, pp. 99f). Democracy really is no more than a modern day illusion.



Rather than allowing for more freedom we are instead witnessing the slow trickle of corporations gaining influence in politics and science. So we find ourselves in a paradoxical position, which can be summed up nicely like so: democratic values are guiding our society despite the fact that the practical manifestation of these values are absent. The interest of one party is essentially suppressing that of another, and it happens to be that it is the few and the rich, who govern the many through clever mechanisms that instill in people a self-governing gaze in accordance with market ideologies (Rose & Miller, 1992, pp. 174f).

So where does this leave cultural psychology? The point advocated for in this commentary is that political awareness should be a more integrated part of the way cultural psychologists work. Highlighting the political interests that undeniably are woven into our practice, and holding firmly onto what research is actually telling us even on topics that are politically charged. The notion of democracy should be important to us for the simple reason that it is endangered. It would not be wrong to state that one thing that is needed is to have science inform politics, rather than having politics inform science, as has been the case in the examples listed previously. There is a need for us to actively battle the mindset that haunts our postmodern world, where the sciences are basically relegated to the place where Paul Feyerabend parked them in his anarchist approach, saying that science provides no better basis for knowing about the world than black magic or numerology does (Feyerabend, 1993, pp. 159–163). What is needed is the opposite. As researchers we inhabit a privileged space that allows us to see the world in a way only few have access to. While we could essentially say the same about voodoo, our discipline differs from it by being stretched far into the realms of both normativity and morality. So much so that science is not only a matter of personal preference and attitudes, but encompasses matters of public interest such as climate changes and mental health issues. We need to trust in the institution of science. It is an essential tool for actually sustaining and furthering a democratic way of life, while remaining transparent as to how we do this. Despite philosophical uncertainties in regards to what we can say from an epistemological and ontological perspective, where we tend towards a doubt-metaphysics, with a highlight of the fragile and fragmented nature of our perception of the world, which is often turned into a weakness that hinders any calls for action on our part. Doubt is a fundamental principle of living, and a strength as it forces us to make critical examinations, especially when we presume to see something as clear cut. Though we cannot discern Archimedean truths while holding true to the principles of cultural psychology, we shouldn't take this as a sign that passivity is the best path forward.

## Conclusions

The end that we should try and achieve is thus double ended. The end-in-view is one where psychology contributes to a more transparent society and serves to uphold the democratic ideals of freedom, equality, and mutual responsibility.

There is a lack of and want for this, which is evident when looking at how science and decision-making is influenced by agents who work in the obscure to twist fortune in their favor, and the limited knowledge we have about the way they operate. Since we are not simply philosophers, but a hybrid of sorts between philosophers and psychologists, we cannot allow ourselves to stay with abstractions and theory. This is where this comment has echoed Dewey's view as he presented it on education. When we first began to acknowledge that our research has an impact on how people view themselves and their place in the world, it also provided us with compelling reasons for why we should also consider the political reality of the world that surrounds us, and act according to the duties that follow from our profession. We should take even greater care to enlighten, support and aide the public in all matters where our knowledge, our moral and ethical understanding of the world, become relevant.

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